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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Joy of the Gospel”

Text: LW #353; John 15:9-17; 1 John 4:1-11

*Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice, With exultation springing,
And with united heart and voice And holy rapture singing,
Proclaim the wonders God has done, How his right arm the victory won.
What price our ransom cost him!* (LW #353 v. 1)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice! For joy is in a Christian’s very being. It is a fruit of the Spirit of God that lives within us. But understand what this joy is: it’s not the same thing as being happy. It’s not the opposite of being sad. It doesn’t mean you smile all the time and don’t have any troubles. It is rather the deep, confident joy of faith. The joy of the Gospel. The joy of hearing and knowing (as we sang:) *the wonders God has done, the victory He has won, and the ransom He has paid . . .* and that He did it all **for you**. To make you His child. And being valued so highly, and loved so much, creates in you, by grace through faith, a deep joy.

And *create* is the right word there, for that is a gift word. And this joy is a gift of God, through His Word and Spirit. You cannot command this joy. You cannot tell someone to be joyful. It doesn’t work. In fact, it really just makes things worse. For then we feel guilty for not being joyful! No, it is as Jesus said: **“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”** It is His joy, given to us through the Word He has spoken to us. The Word that tells us that we are His, and that nothing can change that.

Luther had his share of troubles, which we will sing of now in the next verses. So do we. And these things seek to rob us of our joy by taking our eyes and faith off of Christ. But our joy comes *not* from *not* having troubles and struggles, or by relying on our own strength to overcome them, but in this – that while we may take our eyes off of Christ, our Saviour never takes His eyes off of us. And so while we may fail and fall, He never does. *And that is truly a reason to rejoice!*

*Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay, Death brooded darkly over me,
Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me.
But daily deeper still I fell; My life became a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.*

*My own good works all came to naught, No grace or merit gaining;
Free will against God's judgment fought, Dead to all good remaining.
My fears increased till sheer despair Left only death to be my share; The pangs of hell I suffered.*

*But God had seen my wretched state Before the world's foundation,
And mindful of his mercies great, He planned for my salvation.
He turned to me a father's heart; He did not choose the easy part
But gave his dearest treasure. (LW #353 v. 2-4)*

What is it that is holding *you* bound and captive? That is trying to make your life *a living hell*? That no matter how hard you try, you just can't get yourself out of? What sin, what addiction, what fear, what struggle, what temptation, what issue? *So firmly sin possessed me*, Luther wrote. And that's true not just for some of us, but for all of us.

That's why you hear at the beginning of the service, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" That means that sin isn't just out there, something that *others* do and that affects the world and me – but that sin is in here, in me. And that doesn't just mean that we are confessing that we have *some* sins in me, here and there; *some* bad things that I have done this week, mixed among the good – no! It means that if I stand here before God and try to say that I can do *anything* that is good on my own, that if I think I can do *anything* on my own that is not tainted by sin, *I'm wrong*. Dead wrong. I am deceiving myself, and the truth is not in me. On my own, even the very best that I can do for God is not good enough. We are captives. Like the toxic, filthy, disgusting Katrina flood waters that covered those homes in New Orleans, and infiltrated and ruined everything inside, so has sin done to us. There is nothing to salvage. Those homes were condemned, and so are we.

But! *But God had seen my wretched state . . . and planned for my salvation. He turned to me a father's heart; He did not do the easy part. Easy* would have been to cut and run. **Easy** would have been to let us get ourselves out of the mess we got ourselves into. But God's not about easy; He's about love. And though there is no reason to love us, He does. And He not only planned for our salvation, but as we will now sing, *He did it*. For as we heard from John: "***In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God***

sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.” So that we might live and not die. That the flood waters of sin would not drown us. That the chains of sin, death, and hell would not keep us captive, but that we would be rescued and set free. And just ask those folks in New Orleans – when you are rescued and set free . . . *what a reason to rejoice!*

*God said to his beloved Son: “It’s time to have compassion.
The go, bright jewel of my crown, And bring to all salvation;
From sin and sorrow set them free; Slay bitter death for them that they
May live with you forever.”*

*The Son obeyed his Father’s will, Was born of virgin mother;
And God’s good pleasure to fulfill, He came to be my brother.
His royal power disguised he bore, A servant’s form, like mine, he wore
To lead the devil captive. (LW #353 v. 5-6)*

Please notice one very important thing, at the end of what we just sang: **who’s captive now?** *Before* it was you and me. We sang of Satan’s chains, brooding death, torment, possession, despair, fear, and the pangs of hell. All the sin in the world and in us that tries to keep us captive and rob us of our joy. But now, how things have changed! Now, the one who put us in captivity in *now himself captive* – **and we are free.**

For *the Son obeyed his Father’s will* and came. Born of the virgin, and named Jesus, for **“He will save His people from their sins”** (Mt 1:21), He came. He came and jumped into the toxic waters of our sin in the Jordan. He came and lived in the midst of us filthy, sinful people. He came and took all our sins, or whatever you want to call them – your shortcomings, your failures, your shouldas and couldas, your pride, your coldness, your hardness, your regrets – He took them off of us and put them on Himself. And so He was condemned and put to death on the cross, and we were set free. Like the folks in New Orleans, we couldn’t save ourselves. Only someone from the outside could come and rescue us from the stinkin’, filthy, toxic waters of our sins. *And He did!* He came, and He did!

And so the cross and atonement of Christ has set us free from our bondage, from our sin, from our guilt, from whatever in this world and life that is seeking to drag you down and rob you of your life and your joy. We call it forgiveness, for that is what the word forgiveness literally means – to be released; to be set free. **And you are free.** . . . Not that you won’t sin anymore – *you will*. And not that you won’t have problems anymore – *you will*. But now in Christ, you can see those things in their proper perspective, and that if they could not win *then*, they cannot win *now!* For you have a Saviour, who has

rescued you, forgiven you, raised you to new life with Him in His resurrection, and defeated your enemies. And so you belong to Him, not to them.

And so in Christ, a wonderful reversal has taken place: the captives are free, and the captor is captive! As we heard from John: **“He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”** And so as we will now sing, in Him, we are safe. In Him, we are blessed forever. *What a reason to rejoice!*

*To me he said: “Stay close to me, I am your rock and castle.
Your ransom I myself will be; For you I strive and wrestle;
For I am yours, and you are mine, And where I am you may remain; The foe shall not divide us.*

*“Though he will shed my precious blood, Of life me thus bereaving,
All this I suffer for your good; Be steadfast and believing.
Life will from death the victory win; My innocence shall bear your sin;
And you are blest forever. (LW #353 v. 7-8)*

Stay close to me . . . the foe shall not divide us. But know this: he’ll try! Family problems, personal problems, health problems, work problems, school problems, friend problems, relationship problems, marriage problems, church problems, faith problems; natural disasters, terrorism, crime, politics, personality clashes, anger, hatred, pride, loneliness; even popularity, success, ease, pleasure, luxury – anything and everything to get you to take your eyes off your crucified Saviour and either think you do not need Him anymore, **or** to get you to doubt His love and care for you. To either get you to think you’ve made it, **or** to make you think your Saviour has left you, is punishing you, or has given up on you . . . because you’re such a sinner, you’re just not worth it.

But we hear a much different word from Jesus. *For you I strive and wrestle. All this I suffer for your good. Though he will shed my precious blood.* And all this not just on the cross, although certainly there. But the work of Jesus did not end with the cross, with His resurrection, or even with His ascension. He is still working for you and praying for you. He is still striving and wrestling for you – His baptismal Word and Spirit strengthening the new man in you and putting down the old sinful man; and He is still giving His body and blood for you, now for you to eat and to drink in Holy Communion. And so the victory of life over death earned and accomplished on the cross, He is giving to us here. His victory, through His Word and Sacraments. As He abides in us and we in Him. And this is His joy, for you are His joy.

And so Jesus said: **“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life**

for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants . . . but I have called you friends.” Now, the foe wants you to think you’re a servant, having to earn God’s favor. But Jesus has called you His friend. And you know what? Whatever Jesus calls something, that’s what it is! His word does what it says. And so you are His friends, not because you’ve earned it, but because He made it so. If it were up to you it would not be; but if it is up to Him, then it is. And as we considered last week, as you abide in Him and He in you, through His Word, His Baptism, His Absolution, and His Supper, you will produce fruit. You will do what He commands. Not in your own strength, but because He lives in you and you through Him. Because He promised, and His life He gives, He *gifts*, to you. *So that we can rejoice!*

*“Now to my Father I depart, From earth to heaven ascending,
And, heavenly wisdom to impart, The Holy Spirit sending;
In trouble he will comfort you And teach you always to be true
And into truth shall guide you.*

*“What I on earth have done and taught Guide all your life and teaching;
So shall the kingdom’s work be wrought And honored in your preaching.
But watch lest foes with base alloy The heavenly treasure should destroy;
This final word I leave you.” (LW #353 v. 9-10)*

These verses are what we will celebrate again this Wednesday night, as we remember and celebrate Jesus’ Ascension. And when Jesus ascended, the disciples returned to Jerusalem . . . *rejoicing!* That sounds funny, doesn’t it? For usually when someone leaves us, we are sad. But here we see the truth of what Jesus said: **“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”** And so Jesus *ascends* not to leave us, but to give His Spirit; and the Spirit *descends* to teach us, comfort us, guide us into the truth, and produce in us His fruit . . . including joy.

And so we *can* rejoice, even in troubles, confusion, problems, difficulties, struggles, pain – even in the face of death. For there is no foe more powerful than our Saviour, no enemy He hasn’t defeated. We may not be happy, there may be sorrow and pain – but underneath it all, a strong and *joyful* hope and confidence, knowing that the victory is ours. These difficulties may remain for a while, but the outcome is never in doubt. For as Jesus said: **It is finished.** It truly is! And so we can live in joy and peace, and die in joy and peace.

For Christ is risen! And our enemy is defeated.
Christ is risen! And death is done.
Christ is risen! And as He lives, we live also.

Christ is risen! Yes, He is risen indeed! *Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.